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# Should U.S. Strike Back at Terrorists?

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Interview With Lawrence Eagleburger, Former  
Under Secretary of State, Now President of Kissinger Associates

**Q Mr. Eagleburger, why do you favor retaliation against terrorist groups that attack American targets?**

**A** First, I am totally convinced that our failure to strike back will encourage more and more attacks on us.

Second, the U.S. owes its citizens—here or in any other part of the world—protection to the degree it can give it. Retaliation would make it clear to everybody that Americans traveling abroad are nobody's free targets.

Third, we have an obligation to punish murder of American citizens in places where courts of law cannot reach.

My conviction is that we will save a lot more lives in the long run by being tough and steady.

**Q What makes you so sure that reprisals will succeed in deterring terrorists?**

**A** No one can be certain. But there is at least a chance that retaliation will make terrorists think harder about it before attacking Americans.

**Q Isn't it also a matter of simply getting revenge?**

**A** Revenge under certain circumstances is a perfectly legitimate act of state.

**Q Even if innocent people's lives—perhaps those of Americans—are lost in the process?**

**A** If you do everything you can to reduce the chance of innocent deaths and if the provocation is substantial, it is still an action that needs to be undertaken. These are general principles that must be analyzed in each case.

**Q How do you know which people to attack?**

**A** We won't always know the exact perpetrators. But we will usually know—if not immediately, then over time—at least who supported them and the connections they have.

What we should do is announce that attacks on American citizens by terrorists will bring retaliation at a time

and place of our choosing. It may take 6 hours or 6 months. The timing is not as important as the certainty.

**Q Should the U.S. strike at nations that support terrorism?**

**A** If it's state-supported terrorism, yes. When Iran stands by and lets aircraft hijackers kill two Americans, as they did earlier this year, I think the Iranians should feel the lash.

**Q Wouldn't that be an act of war?**

**A** No more than the action taken against us.

**Q Won't retaliation invite a new cycle of violence?**

**A** My answer is: Isn't it a cycle of violence already? If we are attacked and we fail to reply for fear of a new "cycle of violence," that is paralysis. We may be hit even if we are active. But we have responsibilities to our citizens and responsibilities to our own self-respect.

**Q What are the chances that reprisals would spark a terrorist campaign within the U.S.?**

**A** It is not obvious that's what will happen. Even if true, it is no excuse not to act. We would in effect be saying that Americans abroad are fair game. We can't accept that. □



**YES—**  
**"Our failure to strike back will encourage more and more attacks on us"**

Interview With Robert Kupperman, Senior Adviser,  
Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Q Mr. Kupperman, why shouldn't the U.S., as a matter of policy, retaliate against all terrorist attacks?**

**A** Look, this is a complicated subject in which simple answers must not prevail. Terror attacks can occur anywhere. A simple-minded policy of retaliation would invite equally simple-minded counterretaliation.

**Q Even in the Beirut case?**

**A** That's not the issue. The main goal is to get our people out of there. If we simply lash out, we'll likely find ourselves with very deep domestic problems. There are organizations that exist in the U.S.—for example, the pro-Khomeini Iranian groups. They are not only apparently willing to engage in terrorism overseas but against U.S. interests here as well. If we lash out blindly, the terror we see overseas will almost surely migrate to the U.S.

**Q Why would it come here?**

**A** We know our society is vulnerable. To assume the dangers don't exist is nonsense. The issue is prudence in the face of a substantial chance that we'll end up in trouble. Our infrastructure—the electricity grid, natural-gas lines, communications, water—is extraordinarily vulnerable. We could have several key facilities hit and the Northeast would be without electricity for weeks. If we go berserk over a tragic but comparatively small incident such as the Beirut matter, what are we going to do if we get hit hard here?

**Q Wouldn't American retaliation deter future attacks?**

**A** It certainly hasn't done it for the Israelis, who have been retaliating for years. They're in a constant war of reprisal and counterreprisal.

**Q What about pure revenge? Isn't that a legitimate aim?**

**A** I don't know what the term *legitimate* means here. My interest is in protecting this country. I don't want us to be put onto the track of reprisals and counterreprisals that force us into situations we can't handle. Remember the Libyan hit squad supposedly sent to the U.S. a few years ago? The White House, the whole government at its highest levels went into a steel cocoon. What's going to happen if we face people who are really angry with us?

**Q Doesn't that attitude mean the terrorists win?**

**A** No. We can put more emphasis on preventive measures. For example, U.S. airlines ought not land in Greece. Americans have to be alerted that there are dangerous places in the world. We need better intelligence collection, including surveillance of pro-Khomeini Iranian groups in the U.S. to stop terror operations before they start.

I don't argue that all these attacks should go unanswered. I'm not saying: "Never retaliate." In some instances, we may have to do it. What I'm saying is: The U.S. shouldn't lash out in blind emotion but should be a little bit more cold-blooded. We ought to do some thinking for a change. What we are seeing now, to my mind, is nothing but raw emotion and the tip of the iceberg. □

**NO—**

**"If we lash out blindly, the terror overseas will almost surely migrate to the U.S."**

